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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 001674

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SUBJECT: DISMANTLING ETHIOPIA'S POLITICAL SPACE

REF: A. ADDIS ABABA 1571 B. ADDIS ABABA 1672

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S/NF) This is the first in a series of cables outlining policy options on U.S.-Ethiopia relations in light of recent restrictions on political and democratic space (Refs. A and B).

¶2. (S/NF) The ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in 1991 under much fanfare for toppling the brutal communist "Derg" regime, promising to share power among Ethiopia's strong and diverse ethnic groups, and pledging political and economic reform. This hope also led the United States to consider Prime Minister Meles one of "a new generation" of African leaders. The EPRDF's refusal to genuinely share power with independent-minded coalition members such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in favor of EPRDF-affiliated puppet parties, however, led these groups to abandon the government in preference for armed struggle in the early 1990s. Still, the ruling EPRDF coalition has instituted an appreciable degree of political reform in Ethiopia since coming to power in 1991. The 2005 pre-election campaign period is the best example of such openings, with unprecedented live televised debates between incumbents and contenders, equitable media coverage across political parties, and unhindered opposition access to constituencies. Once significant opposition electoral gains became evident, however, the GoE ceased its experiment with multi-party democracy and began systematically dismantling Ethiopia's democratic space. In June and November 2005 Ethiopian security forces used excessive force in firing on civilian protesters, killing 193 and injuring 763. In late-2005, security forces detained 30,000-50,000 civilians without charge, holding them incommunicado in military controlled camps for nearly three months and arrested 131 senior opposition, civil society, and media leaders on purely political charges ranging from "outrages against the constitution," to "treason," to "attempted genocide."

¶3. (S/NF) The precipitous decline in political space has continued over the past two years. While placating donors by

holding interparty dialogue on contentious issues, the ruling party effectively rejected recommendations by established opposition parties. When the lack of serious engagement forced an opposition walk out, the ruling party leveraged rubber-stamp endorsements by EPRDF-fabricated opposition groups to ram through a new National Electoral Board (NEB), a repressive media law, and a political party financing law that restricts and denies space to the opposition. In the past two years the clearly-partisan NEB has rendered suspect administrative rulings stripping the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP) and Oromo National Congress (ONC) labels from their freely elected and recognized leaders (Addis 145). Ruling party cadres' harassment and intimidation of opposition candidates in the run-up to the April local elections precluded them from registering for the April local elections (Addis 596 and Addis 667). Additionally, the NEB's bureaucratic delays -- and refusals -- in approving domestic election observers prevented credible organizations from observing the elections (Addis 1065). Together these efforts guaranteed an overwhelming marginalization of any political opposition in the 2008 local elections. Ultimately, the opposition took only three out of 3.6 million contested seats in April's local elections. In our assessment, the local elections significantly increased voter apathy and deep frustration over the chances of building on the political gains of the 2005 campaign period and election results.

14. (S/NF) Beyond the scope of formal politics, the GoE's brutal conduct of counter-insurgency operations and harsh oppression of other ethnic groups betray the minority regime's desperate attempts to remain internal control at all costs. And the costs are high. In the Ogaden region, systematic reports by Human Rights Watch and other credible groups of summary executions, rapes, forced conscription, detentions, and beatings by the Ethiopian military against the civilian population (see 2008 Ethiopia Human Rights Report) combined with intentional impediments to the delivery of humanitarian relief supplies (Addis 1284) reveal the GoE tactics that undermine the local population's confidence in the government and drive locals to further support insurgents. Granted that ONLF actions in the Ogaden have increased violence, we have urged the ENDF and GoE that a violent response is not the answer. We have passed Gen. Petraeus' manual on counterinsurgency operations to senior GoE and ENDF leaders as a framework for dealing with the ONLF. CJTF-HOA's inability to conduct civil affairs operations in that region, combined with the close USG-GoE partnership in the public's mind not only prevents us from winning hearts and minds -- something in our own national interest -- but risks allowing the public to conflate the USG with the actions being conducted by our strategic partner -- further putting U.S. national interests at risk as the local population begins to view the U.S. as the enemy. While the tactics are not as extreme or pervasive there, the parallels in the GoE's strategy of maintaining control in the Oromiya region have similarly marginalized the country's largest ethnic group. The perceived USG complacency with these actions, in the minds of Oromos, is best exemplified by one Oromo opposition leader's equation of the U.S.-GoE relationship today with the U.S. relationship with the Shah of Iran in the 1950s-1970s.

15. (S/NF) Mounting efforts to marginalize civil society represent the latest dynamic in the GoE's strategy of eliminating dissent -- a process begun in early 2005 when Ethiopia became the first country in twenty years to expel the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and IFES. Despite acquitting the civil society leaders detained after the 2005 post-election turmoil on the sole charge they faced, the Ethiopian court on that same day imposed a new charge and convicted the two leaders without the opportunity for a defense. The GoE's refusal to release the two on parole in stark contrast to standard practice and under a clear directive from the ruling party's central committee (Addis 260), only confirmed the GoE's intolerance for dissent.

¶6. (S/NF) In April, the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington and the Foreign Ministry began informing USAID-funded NGOs that the GoE would no longer register USAID implementing partners in Ethiopia, instead requiring them to operate under more tenuous Memoranda of Understanding signed with specific GoE entities. On May 2, the final nail was unveiled as the Justice Ministry distributed a draft civil society proclamation -- reportedly developed personally by Prime Minister Meles and the Justice Minister -- that effectively bars civil society groups from activities in the democracy, good governance, human rights, community development, conflict resolution, justice, and law enforcement sectors, and establishes draconian penalties for civil society individuals who violate the highly subjective authorities of a new civil society agency (Addis 1223). Entry, registration, and operations of technical assistance and other contractor personnel and commodities are becoming increasingly problematic with the GoE. A very-poorly introduced requirement replacing the previous VAT exemption for foreign assistance implementing partners with a to-be-established VAT reimbursement scheme and the GoE's elimination of duty free imports for implementing partners appears to violate the Ethiopia-U.S. Bilateral Assistance Agreement (Ref. B). The GoE's recent refusal to register U.S. implementing partners or accord them bilateral Agreement-secured privileges is even more problematic.

¶7. (S/NF) Embassy Addis Ababa views this precipitous narrowing of Ethiopia's political space as undermining Ethiopia's stability which could affect the entire Horn of Africa region.

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